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ABSTRACT

Designed to make readers more aware of the systematic neglect of women's experience in the traditional literary canon, the paper presents feminist alternatives to the male-dominated canon, an assessment of their impact on the standard canon, and a proposal for new directions for further work. Two suggested approaches for feminist criticism are (1) emphasizing alternative readings that reinterpret women's character, motivations, and actions and that identify and challenge sexist ideology; and/or (2) concentrating on gaining admission to the literary canon for women writers. Nina Baym's introduction to a study of American women's fiction between 1820 and 1870 is presented, the viewpoints of feminist scholars such as Patricia Meyer Spacks, Louise Bernikow, Ellen Moers, Nina Auerbach, and Judith Lowder Newton are discussed and criticisms raised by black and lesbian feminist scholars are noted. A discussion of the fundamentally elite nature of the existing canon is followed by a word about the increasing acceptance being given to women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, private poetry, and popular women's literature. The document concludes that feminist alternatives must continue to be pursued--not so as to label and dismiss even the most sexist literary classics, but to apprehend them in all their human dimensions. (LH)

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Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon

by

Lillian S. Robinson

> Successful plots have often had gunpowder in them. Feminist critics have gone so far as to take treason to the canon as our text.
>
> -- Jane Marcus[1]

The lofty seat of canonized bards, (Pollok, 1827).

As with many other restrictive institutions, we are hardly aware of it until we come into conflict with it; the elements of the literary canon are simply absorbed by the apprentice scholar and critic in the normal course of graduate education, without anyone's ever seeming to inculcate or defend them. Appeal, were any necessary, would be to the other meaning of "canon," that is, to established standards of judgment and of taste. Not that either definition is presented as rigid and immutable -- far from it, for lectures in literary history are full of wry references to a benighted though hardly distant past when, say, the metaphysical poets were insufficiently appreciated or Vachel Lindsay was the most modern poet recognized in American

literature. Whence the acknowledgement of a subjective dimension, sometimes generalized as "sensibility," to the category of taste. Sweeping modifications in the canon are said to occur because of changes in collective sensibility, but individual admissions and elevations from "minor" to "major" status tend to be achieved by successful critical promotion, which is to say, demonstration that a particular author does meet generally accepted criteria of excellence.

The results, moreover, are nowhere codified: they are neither set down in a single place, nor are they absolutely uniform. In the visual arts and in music, the cold realities of patronage, purchase, presentation in private and public collections or performance on concert programs create the conditions for a work's canonical status or lack of it. No equivalent set of institutional arrangements exists for literature, however. The fact of publication and even the feat of remaining in print for generations, which are at least analogous to the ways in which pictures and music are displayed, are not the same sort of indicators; they represent less of an investment and hence less general acceptance of their canonicity. In the circumstances, it may seem somewhat of an exaggeration to speak of "the" literary canon, almost paranoid to call it an institution, downright hysterical to characterize that institution as restrictive. The whole business is so much more informal, after all, than any of these terms implies, the concomitant processes so much more gentlemanly. Surely, it is more like a gentlemen's agreement than a repressive instrument -- isn't it?

But a gentleman is inescapably -- that is, by definition -- a member of a privileged class and of the male sex. From this perspective, it is probably quite accurate to think of the canon as an entirely gentlemanly artifact, considering how few works by non-members of that class and sex make it into the informal agglomeration of course syllabi, anthologies, and widely-commented upon "standard authors" that constitutes the canon as it is generally understood. For, beyond their availability on book-shelves, it is through the teaching and study -- one might even say the habitual teaching and study -- of certain works that they become institutionalized as canonical literature. Within that broad canon, moreover, those admitted butread only in advanced courses, commented upon only by more or less narrow specialists, are subjected to the further tyranny of "major" versus "minor."

For more than a decade, now, feminist scholars have been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others. Moreover, the argument runs, the predominantly male authors in the canon show us the female character and relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and contributes to sexist ideology -- an aspect of these classic works about which the critical tradition remained silent for generations. The feminist challenge, although intrinsically (and, to my mind, refreshingly) polemical, has not been simply a reiterated attack, but a series of suggested alternatives to the male-dominated membership and attitudes of the accepted canon. In this essay, I propose to

examine these feminist alternatives, assess their impact on the standard canon, and propose some directions for further work. Although my emphasis in each section is on the substance of the challenge, the underlying polemic is, I believe, abundantly clear.

... the presence of canonized forefathers, (Burke, 1790).

Start with the Great Books, the traditional desert-island ones, the foundation of courses in the western humanistic tradition. No women authors, of course, at all, but within the works thus canonized, certain monumental female images: Helen, Penelope, and Clytemnestra, Beatrice and the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, Bérénice, Cunégonde and Margarete. The list of interesting female characters is enlarged if we shift to the Survey of English Literature and its classic texts; here, moreover, there is the possible inclusion of a female author or even several, at least as the course's implicit "historical background" ticks through and past the Industrial Revolution. It is a possibility that is not always honored in the observance. "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf" is a pleasant enough joke, but, though lots of surveys begin with the Anglo Saxon epic, not all that many conclude with Mrs. Dalloway. Even in the nineteenth century, the pace and the necessity of mass omissions may mean leaving out Austen, one of the Brontës, or Eliot. The analogous over-view of American literary masterpieces, despite the relative brevity and modernity of the period considered, is likely to yield a similarly all-male pantheon; Emily Dickinson may be admitted -- but not necessarily -- and no one else even comes close.[2] Here again, the male-authored

canon contributes to the body of information, stereotype, inference, and surmise about the female sex that is general in the culture.

Once this state of affairs has been exposed, there are two possible approaches for feminist criticism: It can emphasize alternative readings of the tradition, readings that reinterpret women's character, motivations, and actions and that identify and challenge sexist ideology. Or it can concentrate on gaining admission to the canon for literature by women writers. Both sorts of work are being pursued, although, to the extent that feminist criticism has defined itself as a sub-field of literary studies -- as distinguished from an approach or method -- it has tended to concentrate on writing by women.

In fact, however, the current wave of feminist theory began as criticism of certain key texts -- both literary and para-literary -- in the dominant culture. Kate Millett, Eva Figes, Elizabeth Janeway, Germaine Greer, and Carolyn Heilbrun all use the techniques of essentially literary analysis on the social forms and forces surrounding those texts.[3] The texts themselves may be regarded as "canonical" in the sense that all have had significant impact on the culture as a whole, although the target being addressed is not literature or its canon.

In criticism that is more strictly literary in its scope, much attention has been concentrated on male writers in the American tradition. Books like Annette Kolodny's The Lay of the Land and Judith Fetterley's The Resisting Reader have no systematic, comprehensive equivalent in the criticism of British or European literature.[4] Both of these studies identify masculine values and

imagery in a wide range of writings, as well as the alienation that is their consequence for women, men, and society as a whole. In a similar vein, Mary Ellmann's Thinking About Women examines ramifications of the tradition of "phallic criticism" as applied to writers of both sexes.[5] These books have in common with one another and with overarching theoretical manifestos like Sexual Politics a sense of having been betrayed by a culture that was supposed to be elevating, liberating, and one's own.

By contrast, feminist work devoted to that part of the Western tradition which is neither American nor contemporary is likelier to be more even-handed. "Feminist critics," declare Lenz, Greene, and Neely in introducing their collection of essays on Shakespeare, "recognize that the greatest artists do not necessarily duplicate in their art the orthodoxies of their culture; they may exploit them to create character or intensify conflict, they may struggle with, criticize, or transcend them."[6] From this perspective, Milton may come in for some censure, Shakespeare and Chaucer for both praise and blame, but the clear intention of a feminist approach to these classic authors is to enrich our understanding of what is going on in their texts, as well as how -- for better, for worse, or for both -- they have shaped our own literary and social ideas.[7] At its angriest, none of this reinterpretation offers a fundamental challenge to the canon as canon; although it posits new values, it never suggests that, in the light of those values, we ought to reconsider whether the great monuments are really so great, after all.

... such is all the worlde hathe confirmed and agreed upon, that it is authentique and canonical, (T. Wilson, 1553).

In an evolutionary model of feminist studies in literature, work on male authors is often characterized as "early," implicitly primitive, whereas scholarship on female authors is the later development, enabling us to see women -- the writers themselves and the women they write about -- as active agents, rather than passive "images" or victims. This implicit characterization of studies addressed to male writers is as inaccurate as the notion of an inexorable evolution. In fact, as the very definition of feminist criticism has come increasingly to mean scholarship and criticism devoted to women writers, work on the male tradition has continued. By this point, there has been a study of the female characters or the views on the woman question of every major -- perhaps every known -- author in Anglo-American, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian, German, and Scandinavian literature.[8]

Nonetheless, it is an undeniable fact that most feminist criticism focuses on women writers, so that the feminist efforts to humanize the canon have usually meant bringing a woman's point of view to bear by incorporating works by women into the established canon. The least threatening way to do so is to follow the accustomed pattern of making the case for individual writers one by one. The case, here, consists in showing that an already recognized woman author has been denied her rightful place, presumably because of the general devaluation of female efforts and subjects. More often than not, such work involves showing that a woman already securely established in the canon belongs in

the first, rather than the second rank. The biographical and critical efforts of R.W.B. Lewis and Cynthia Griffin Wolfe, for example, have attempted to enhance Edith Wharton's reputation in this way.[9] Obviously, no challenge is presented to the particular notions of literary quality, timelessness, universality, and so on that constitute the rationale for canonicity. The underlying argument, rather, is that consistency, fidelity to those values, requires recognition of at least the few best and best known women writers. Equally obviously, this approach does not call the notion of the canon itself into question.

We acknowledge it Canonlike, but not Canonicall, (Bishop Barlow, 1601).

Many feminist critics reject the method of case-by-case demonstration. The wholesale consignment of women's concerns and productions to a grim area bounded by triviality and obscurity cannot be compensated for by tokenism. True equity can be attained, they argue, only by opening up the canon to a much larger number of female voices. This is an endeavor that eventually brings basic aesthetic questions to the fore.

Initially, however, the demand for wider representation of female authors is substantiated by an extraordinary effort of intellectual reappropriation. The emergence of feminist literary study has been characterized, at the base, by scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication, and reappraisal of "lost" or undervalued writers and their work. From Rebecca Harding Davis and Kate Chopin through Zora Neale Hurston and Mina Loy to Meridel

LeSueur and Rebecca West, reputations have been reborn or remade and a female counter-canon has come into being, out of components that were largely unavailable even a dozen years ago.[10]

In addition to constituting a feminist alternative to the male-dominated tradition, these authors also have a claim to representation in "the" canon. From this perspective, the work of recovery itself makes one sort of prima facie case, giving the lie to the assumption, where it has existed, that, aside from a few names that are household words -- differentially appreciated, but certainly well known -- there simply has not been much serious literature by women. Before any aesthetic arguments have been advanced either for or against the admission of such works to the general canon, the new literary scholarship on women has demonstrated that the pool of potential applicants is far larger than anyone has hitherto suspected.

Would Augustine, if he held all the books to have an equal right to canonicity ... have preferred some to others? (W. Fitzgerald, trans. Whitaker, 1849).

But the aesthetic issues cannot be forestalled for very long. We need to understand whether the claim is being made that many of the newly recovered or validated texts by women meet existing criteria or, on the other hand, that those criteria themselves intrinsically exclude or tend to exclude women and hence should be modified or replaced. If this polarity is not, in fact, applicable to the process, what are the grounds for presenting a large number of new female candidates for (as it were) canonization?

The problem is epitomized in Nina Baym's introduction to her study of American women's fiction between 1820 and 1870:

> Reexamination of this fiction may well show it to lack the esthetic, intellectual and moral complexity and artistry that we demand of great literature. I confess frankly that, although I have found much to interest me in these books, I have not unearthed a forgotten Jane Austen or George Eliot or hit upon the one novel that I would propose to set alongside The Scarlet Letter. Yet I cannot avoid the belief that "purely" literary criteria, as they have been employed to identify the best American works, have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male -- in favor of, say, a whaling ship, rather than a sewing circle as a symbol of the human community ... While not claiming any literary greatness for any of the novels ... in this study, I would like at least to begin to correct such a bias by taking their content seriously. And it is time, perhaps -- though this task lies outside my scope here -- to reexamine the grounds upon which certain hallowed American classics have been called great.[11]

Now, if students of literature may be allowed to confess to one Great Unreadable among the Great Books, my own bête noire has always been the white whale; I have always felt I was missing something in Moby Dick that is clearly there for many readers and that is "there" for me when I read (say) Aeschylus or Austen. So I find Baym's strictures congenial, at first reading. Yet the contradictory nature of the position is also evident on the face of it. Am I or am I not being invited to construct a (feminist) aesthetic rationale for my impatience with Moby Dick? Do Baym and the current of thought she represents accept "esthetic, intellectual and moral complexity and artistry" as the grounds of greatness or are they challenging those values, as well?

As Myra Jehlen points out most lucidly, this attractive position will not bear close analysis: "(Baym) is having it both ways, admitting the artistic limitations of the women's fiction ... and at the same time denying the validity of the rulers that measure those limitations, disdaining any ambition to reorder the literary canon and, on second thought, challenging the canon after all, or rather challenging not the canon itself but the grounds for its selection."[12] Jehlen understates the case, however, in calling the duality a paradox, which is, after all, an intentionally created and essentially rhetorical phenomenon. What is involved here is more like the agony of feminist criticism, for it is the champions of women's literature who are torn between defending the quality of their discoveries and radically redefining literary quality itself.

Those who are concerned with the canon as a pragmatic instrument, rather than a powerful abstraction -- the compilers of more equitable anthologies or course syllabi, for example -- have opted for an uneasy compromise. The literature by women that they seek -- as well as that by members of excluded racial and ethnic groups and by working people in general -- conforms as closely as possible to the traditional canons of taste and judgment. Not that it reads like such literature, as far as content and viewpoint are concerned, but the same words about artistic intent and achievement may be applied without absurdity. At the same time, the rationale for a new syllabus or anthology relies on a very different criterion: that of truth to the culture being represented, the whole culture and not the creation of an almost entirely male white elite. Again, no one seems to be proposing -- aloud -- the elimination of Moby Dick or The Scarlet Letter, just squeezing them over somewhat to make room for another literary reality, which, joined with the existing canon, will come closer to telling the (poetic) truth.

The effect is pluralist, at best, and the epistemological assumptions underlying the search for a more fully representative literature are strictly empiricist: By including the perspective of women (who are, after all, half-the-population), we will "know more" about the culture as it actually was. No one suggests that there might be something in this literature itself that challenges the values and even the validity of the previously all-male tradition. There is no reason why the canon need speak with one voice or as one man on the fundamental questions of human experience.

Indeed, even as an elite white male voice, it can hardly be said to do so. Yet a commentator like Baym has only to say "it is time, perhaps ... to reexamine the grounds," while not proceeding to do so, for feminists to be accused of wishing to "throw out" the entire received culture. The argument could be more usefully joined, perhaps, if there were a current within feminist criticism that went beyond insistence on representation to consideration of precisely how inclusion of women's writing alters our view of the tradition. Or even one that suggested some radical surgery on the list of male authors usually represented.

After all, when we turn from the construction of pantheons, which have no prescribed number of places, to the construction of course syllabi, then something does have to be eliminated each time something else is added, and here ideologies, aesthetic and extra-aesthetic, do necessarily come into play. Is the canon and hence the syllabus based on it to be regarded as the compendium of excellence or as the record of cultural history? For there comes a point when the proponent of making the canon recognize the achievement of both sexes has to put up or shut up; either a given woman writer is "good" enough to replace some male writer on the prescribed reading list or she is not. If she is not, then either she should replace him anyway, in the name of telling the truth about the culture, or she should not, in the (unexamined) name of excellence. This is the debate that will have to be engaged and that has so far been broached only in the most "inclusionary" of terms. It is ironic that in American literature, where attacks on the male tradition have been most bitter and the reclamation of

women writers so spectacular, the appeal has still been only to pluralism, generosity, and guilt. It is populism without the politics of populism.

To canonize your owne writers, (Polimanteria, 1595).

Although I referred earlier to a feminist counter-canon, it is only in certain rather restricted contexts that literature by women has in fact been explicitly placed "counter" to the dominant canon. Generally speaking, feminist scholars have been more concerned with establishing the existence, power, and significance of a specifically female tradition. Such a possibility is adumbrated in the title of Patricia Meyer Spacks's The Female Imagination; however, this book's overview of selected themes and stages in the female life-cycle as treated by some women writers neither broaches nor (obviously) suggests an answer to the question of whether there is "a" female imagination and what characterizes it.[13]

Somewhat earlier, in her anthology of British and American women poets, Louise Bernikow had made a more positive assertion of a continuity and connection subsisting among them.[14] She leaves it to the poems, however, to forge their own links, and, in a collection that boldly and incisively crosses boundaries between published and unpublished writing, literary and anonymous authorship, "high" art, folk art, and music, it is not easy for the reader to identify what the editor believes it is that makes women's poetry specifically "women's."

Ellen Moers centers her argument for a (transhistorical) female tradition around the concept of "heroinism," a quality shared by women writers over time with the female characters they created.[15] Moers also points out another kind of continuity, documenting the way that women writers have read, commented on, and been influenced by the writings of other women who were their predecessors or contemporaries. There is also an unacknowledged continuity between the writer and her female reader. Elaine Showalter conceives the female tradition, embodied particularly in the domestic and sensational fiction of the nineteenth century, as being carried out through a kind of subversive conspiracy between author and audience.[16] Showalter is at her best in discussing this minor "women's fiction." Indeed, without ever making a case for popular genres as serious literature, she bases her arguments about a tradition more solidly on them than on acknowledged major figures like Virginia Woolf. By contrast, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar focus, although not exclusively, on key literary figures, bringing women writers and their subjects together through the theme of perceived female aberration -- in the act of literary creation itself, as well as in the behaviours of the created persons or personae.[17]

Moers's vision of a continuity based on "heroinism" finds an echo in later feminist criticism that posits a discrete, perhaps even autonomous "women's culture." The idea of such a culture has been developed by social historians studying the "homosocial" world of nineteenth century women.[18] It is a view that underlies, for example, Nina Auerbach's study of relationships among women

in selected novels, where strong, supportive ties between mothers, daughters, sisters, and female friends not only constitute the real history in which certain women are conceived as living, but function as a normative element, as well.[19] That is, fiction in which positive relations subsist to nourish the heroine comes off much better, from Auerbach's point of view, than fiction in which such relations do not exist.

In contrast, Judith Lowder Newton sees the heroines of women's fiction as active, rather than passive, precisely because they do live in a man's world, not an autonomous female one.[20] Defining their power as "ability," rather than "control," she perceives "both a preoccupation with power and subtle power strategies" being exercised by the women in novels by Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Elliot. Understood in this way, the female tradition, whether or not it in fact reflects and fosters a "culture" of its own, provides an alternative complex of possibilities for women, to be set beside the pits and pedestals offered by all too much of the Great Tradition.

Canonize such a multifarious Genealogie of Comments, (Nashe, 1593).

Historians like Smith-Rosenberg and Cott are careful to specify that their generalizations extend only to white middle- and upper-class women of the nineteenth century. Although literary scholars are equally scrupulous about national and temporal boundaries of their subject, they tend to use the gender term comprehensively. In this way, conclusions about "women's fiction" or

"female consciousness" have been drawn or jumped to from considering a body of work whose authors are all white and comparatively privileged. Of the critical studies I have mentioned, only Bernikow's anthology, The World Split Open, brings labor songs, Black women's blues lyrics, and anonymous ballads into conjunction with poems that were written for publication by professional writers, both Black and white. The other books, which build a more extensive case for a female tradition Berkinow only suggests, delineate their subject in such a way as to exlude not only Black and working-class authors, but any notion that race and class might be relevant categories in the definition and apprehension of "women's literature." Similarly, even for discussions of writers who were known to be lesbians, this aspect of the female tradition often remains unacknowledged; worse yet, some of the books that develop the idea of a female tradition are openly homophobic, employing the word "lesbian" only perjoratively.[21]

Black and lesbian scholars, however, have directed much less energy to polemics against the feminist "mainstream" than to concrete, positive work on the literature itself. Recovery and reinterpretation of a wealth of unknown or undervalued texts has suggested the existence of both a Black women's tradition and a lesbian tradition. In a clear parallel with the relationship between women's literature in general and the male-dominated tradition, both are by definition part of women's literature, but they are also distinct from and independent of it.

There are important differences, however, between these two traditions and the critical effort surrounding them. Black feminist criticism has the task of demonstrating that, in the face of all the obstacles a racist and sexist society has been able to erect, a continuous line of Black women have written and written well. It is a matter of gaining recognition for the quality of the writing itself and respect for its principal subject, the lives and consciousness of Black women. Black women's literature is also an element of black literature as a whole, where the recognized voices have usually been male. A triple imperative is therefore at work: establishing a discrete and significant Black female tradition, then situating it within Black literature, and (along with the rest of that literature), within the common American literary heritage.[22] So far, unfortunately, each step toward integration has met with continuing exclusion. A Black women's tradition has been recovered and reevaluated, chiefly through the efforts of Black feminist scholars. Only some of that work has been accepted as part of either a racially-mixed women's literature or a two-sex Black literature. As for the gatekeepers of American literature "in general," how many of them, in 1982, are willing to swing open the portals even for Zora Neale Hurston or Paule Marshall? How many have heard of them?

The issue of "inclusion," moreover, brings up questions that echo those raised by opening the male-dominated canon to women. How do generalizations about women's literature "as a whole" change when the work of Black women is not merely added to but

duly incorporated into that tradition? How does our sense of Black literary history change? And what implications do these changes have for reconsideration of the American canon?

Whereas many white literary scholars continue to behave as if there were no major Black woman writers, most are prepared to admit that certain well known white writers were lesbians for all or part of their lives. The problem is getting beyond a position that says either "so that's what was wrong with her!" or, alternatively, "it doesn't matter who she slept with -- we're talking about literature." Much lesbian feminist criticism has addressed theoretical questions about which literature is actually part of the lesbian tradition, all writing by lesbians, for example, or all writing by women about women's relations with one another. Questions of class and race enter here, as well, both in their own guise and in the by-now familiar form of "aesthetic standards." Who speaks for the lesbian community: the highly educated experimentalist with an unearned income or the naturalistic working-class autobiographer? Or are both the same kind of foremother, reflecting the community's range of cultural identities and resistance?[23]

... a cheaper way of Canon-making in a corner, (Baxter, 1639).

It is not only members of included social groups, however, who have challenged the fundamentally elite nature of the existing canon. "Elite" is a literary, as well as a social category. It is possible to argue for taking all texts seriously as texts without arguments based on social oppression or cultural exclusion,

and popular genres have therefore been studied as part of the female literary tradition. Feminists are not in agreement as to whether domestic and sentimental fiction, the female Gothic, the women's sensational novel functioned as instruments of expression, repression, or subversion, but they have successfully revived interest in the question as a legitimate cultural issue.[24] It is no longer automatically assumed that literature addressed to the mass female audience is necessarily bad because it is sentimental or, for that matter, sentimental because it is addressed to that audience. Feminist criticism has examined without embarrassment an entire literature that was previously dismissed solely because it was popular with women and affirmed standards and values associated with femininity. And proponents of the "continuous tradition" and "women's culture" positions have insisted that this material be placed beside women's "high" art as part of the articulated and organic female tradition.

This point of view remains controversial within the orbit of women's studies, but the real problems start when it comes into contact with the universe of canon-formation. Permission may have been given the contemporary critic to approach a wide range of texts, transcending and even ignoring the traditional canon. But in a context where the ground of struggle -- highly contested, moreover -- concerns Edith Wharton's advancement to somewhat more major status, fundamental assumptions have changed very little. Can Hawthorne's "d----d mob of scribbling women" <u>really</u> be invading

the realms so long sanctified by Hawthorne himself and his brother-geniuses? Is this what feminist criticism or even feminist cultural history means? Is it -- to apply some outmoded and deceptively simple categories -- a good development or a bad one? If these questions have not been raised, it is because women's literature and the female tradition tend to be evoked as an autonomous cultural experience, not impinging on the rest of literary history. Wisdome vnder a ragged coate is seldome canonicall, (Crosse, 1603).

Whether dealing with popular genres or high art, commentary on the female tradition usually has been based on work that was published at some time and was produced by professional writers. But feminist scholarship has also pushed back the boundaries of literature in other directions, considering a wide range of forms and styles in which women's writing -- especially that of women who did not perceive themselves as writers -- appears. In this way, women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographics, oral histories, and private poetry have come under critical scrutiny as evidence of women's consciousness and expression.

Generally speaking, feminist criticism has been very open to such material, recognizing that the very conditions that gave many women the impetus to write made it impossible for their culture to define them as writers. This acceptance has expanded our sense of possible forms and voices, but it has not challenged our received sense of appropriate style. What it amounts to is that if a women writing in isolation and with no public audience in view nonetheless had "good" -- that is, canonical -- models,

we are impressed with the strength of her text when she applies what she has assimilated about writing to her own experiences as a woman. If, however, her literary models were chosen from the same popular literature that some critics are now beginning to recognize as part of the female tradition, then she has not got hold of an expressive instrument that empowers her.

At MLA five years ago, I included in my paper the entire two-page autobiography of a participant in the Summer Schools for Women Workers held at Bryn Mawr in the first decades of the century. It is a circumstantial narrative in which events from the melancholy to the melodramatic are accumulated in a serviceable, somewhat hackneyed style. The anonymous "Seamer on Men's Underwear" had a unique sense of herself both as an individual and as a member of the working class. But was she a writer? Part of the audience was as moved as I was by the narrative, but the majority was outraged at the piece's failure to meet the criteria -- particularly, the "complexity criteria" -- of good art.

When I developed my remarks for publication, I wrote about the problems of dealing with an author who is trying too hard to write elegantly and I attempted to make the case that "cliches or sentimentality need not be signals of meretricious prose, and that ultimately it is honest writing for which criticism should be looking.[25] Nowadays, I would also address the question of the female tradition, the role of popular fiction within it, and the influence of that fiction on its audience. It seems to me that, if we accept the work of the professional "scribbling woman,"

we have also to accept its literary consequences, not drawing the line at the place where that literature may have been the force which enabled an otherwise inarticulate segment of the population to grasp a means of expression and communication.

Once again, however, the arena is the female tradition itself. If we are thinking in terms of canon-formation, it is the alternative canon. Until the aesthetic arguments can be fully worked out in the feminist context, it will be impossible to argue, in the general marketplace of literary ideas, that the novels of Henry James ought to give place -- a <u>little</u> place, even -- to the diaries of his sister Alice. At this point, I suspect most of our male colleagues would consider such a request, even in the name of Alice James, much less the Seamer on Men's Underwear, little more than a form of "reverse discrimination" -- a concept to which some of them are already overly attached. It is up to feminist scholars, when and as we determine that this is indeed the right course to pursue, to demonstrate that such in inclusion would constitute a genuinely affirmative action for all of us.

The development of feminist literary criticism and scholarship has already proceeded through a number of identifiable stages. Its pace is more reminiscent of the survey course than of the slow processes of canon-formation and revision, and it has been more successful in defining and sticking to its own intellectual turf, the female counter-canon, than in gaining general canonical recognition for Edith Wharton, Fanny Fern, or the female diarists of the Westward Expansion. In one sense,

the more coherent our sense of the female tradition is, the stronger our eventual case. Yet, the longer we wait, the more comfortable the women's literature ghetto -- separate, apparently autonomous, and far from equal -- may begin to feel.

At the same time, I believe the challenge cannot come only by means of the patent value of the work of women. We must pursue the questions certain of us have raised and retreated from as to the eternal verity of the received standards of greatness or even goodness. And, while not abandoning our new-found female tradition, we have to return to confrontation with "the" canon, examining it as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes. The point in so doing is not to label and hence dismiss even the most sexist literary classics, but to all of us to apprehend them, finally, in all their human dimensions.

NOTES

1. Jane Marcus, "Gunpowder, Treason and Plot," talk delivered at the School of Criticism and Theory, Northwestern University, colloquium on "The Challenge of Feminist Criticism," November, 1981. Seeking authority for the sort of creature a literary canon might be, I turned, like many another, to the Oxford English Dictionary. The tags that head up the several sections of this essay are a by-product of that effort, rather than of any more exact and laborious scholarship.

2. In a survey of fifty introductory courses in American literature offered at twenty-five U.S. colleges and universities, Emily Dickinson's name appeared more often than that of any other women writer: twenty times. This frequency puts her in a respectable twelfth place. Among the sixty-one most frequently taught authors, only seven others are women; Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin are each mentioned eight times, Sarah Orne Jewett and Anne Bradstreet six each, Flannery O'Connor four times, Willa Cather and Mary Wilkins Freeman each three times. The same list includes five Black authors, all of them male. Response from other institutions received too late for compilation only confirmed these findings. (See Paul Lauter, "A Small Survey of Introductory Courses in American Literature," Women's Studies Quarterly, 9 [Winter 1981]). In another study, ninety-nine professors of English responded to a survey asking which works of American literature published since 1941 they thought should be considered classics and which books should be taught to college

students. The work mentioned by the most respondents (fifty-nine citations) was Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. No other work by a Black appears among the top twenty that constitutes the published list of results. Number nineteen, The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor is the only work on this list by a woman. (Chronicle of Higher Education, September 29, 1982.) For British literature, the feminist claim is not that Austen, the Brontës, Eliot, and Woolf are habitually omitted, but rather that they are by no means always included in courses that, like the survey I taught at Columbia some years ago, had room for a single nineteenth-century novel. I know, however, of no systematic study of course offerings in this area more recent than Elaine Showalter's "Women in the Literary Curriculum," College English, 32 (1971).

3. Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); Eva Figes, Patriarchial Attitudes (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Elizabeth Janeway, Man's World, Woman's Place: A Study in Social Mythology (New York: Morrow, 1971); Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); Carolyn Heilbrun, Toward a Recognition of Androgyny (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). The phenomenon these studies represent is discussed at greater length in a study of which I am a co-author; see Ellen Carol DuBois, Gail Paradise Kelly, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, and Lillian S. Robinson, Feminist Scholarship: Challenge, Discovery, and Impact, forthcoming from University of Illinois Press.

4. Annette Kolodny, The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience in American Life and Letters (Chapel Hill: University

of North Carolina Press, 1975); Judith Fetterly, The Resisting Reader (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

5. Mary Ellmann, Thinking About Women (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968).

6. The Women's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 4. In this vein, see also Juliet Dusinberre, Shakespeare and the Nature of Woman (London: Macmillan, 1975); Irene G. Dash, Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

7. Sandra M. Gilbert, "Patriarchal Poetics and the Woman Reader: Reflections on Milton's Bogey," PMLA, 93 (1978), 368-82; The articles on Chaucer and Shakespeare in The Authority of Experience, ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), reflect the complementary tendency.

8. As I learned when surveying fifteen years' worth of Dissertation Abstracts and MLA programs, much of this work has taken the form of theses or conference papers, as contrasted with books and journal articles.

9. See R.W.B. Lewis, Edith Wharton: A Biography (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Cynthia Griffin Wolff, A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); see also Marlene Springer, Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin: A Reference Guide (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1976).

10. See, for instance, Rebecca Harding Davis, Life in the Iron Mills (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1972), with a biographical and critical Afterword by Tillie Olsen; Kate Chopin, The Complete Works, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Alice Walker, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," Ms., 3 (March, 1975), 74-75; Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Zora Neale Hurston, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing and Also When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1979), with introductory material by Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington; Carolyn Burke, "Becoming Mina Loy," Women's Studies, 7 (1979), 136-50; Meridel LeSueur, Ripenings (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1981); on LeSueur, see also We Sing Our Struggle: A Tribute to Us All, ed. Mary McAnally (Tulsa: Cardinal Press, 1982); The Young Rebecca, Writings of Rebecca West, 1911-1917, selected and introduced by Jane Marcus (New York: Viking, 1982).

The examples cited are all from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Lesueur and West are still alive. Valuable work has also been done on women writers before the Industrial Revolution. See By a Woman Writt: Literature from Six Centuries by and About Women, ed. Joan Goulianos (Indianapolis: Bobbs, Merrill, 1973); The Female Spectator: English Women Writers before 1800, ed. Mary R. Mahl and Helene Koon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

11. Nina Baym, Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-70 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 14-15.

12. Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 6 (1981), 592.

13. Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Female Imagination (New York: Knopf, 1975).

14. The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets In England and America, 1552-1950, ed. and introduced by Louise Bernikow (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1974).

15. Ellen Moers, Literary Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976).

16. Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

17. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

18. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 1 (1975), 1-30; Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

19. Nina Auerbach, Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). See also Janet M. Todd, Women's Friendship in Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Louise Bernikow, Among Women (New York: Harmony Crown, 1980).

20. Judith Lowder Newton, Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981).

21. On the failings of feminist criticism with respect to Black and/or lesbian writers, see Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Conditions, 2 (1977); Mary Helen Washington, "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies," College English, 43 (1981), 1-11; Bonnie Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism," Feminist Studies, 7 (1981).

22. See, for instance, Smith, "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Christian, Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Black Sister, ed. Erlene Stetson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) and its forthcoming sequel; Gloria Hull, "Black Women Poets from Wheatley to Walker," in Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature, ed. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker and Beverley Guy-Sheftall (New York: Arbor, 1979); Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction: In Pursuit of Our Own History,"Midnight Birds (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1980); the essays and bibliographies in But Some of Us Are Brave, ed. Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982).

23. See Zimmerman, "What Has Never Been"; Adrienne Rich, "Jane Eyre: Trials of a Motherless Girl," in Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978 (New York: Norton, 1979); Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York:

Morrow, 1981); the literary essays in Lesbian Studies, ed. Margaret Cruikshank (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982).

24. Some examples on different sides of the question are: Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Knopf, 1976); Showalter, A Literature of Their Own and her article, "Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorial Female Authorship," Feminist Studies, 2 (1975), 5-23; Katherine Ellis, "Paradise Lost: The Limits of Domesticity in the Nineteenth-Century Novel," Ibid., 55-63. See also Ellis's, "Charlotte Smith's Subversive Gothic," Feminist Studies, 3 (1976), 51-55.

25. "Working/Women/Writing," in Lillian S. Robinson, Sex, Class, and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 252.